



STATE OF WASHINGTON
WASHINGTON STATE BOARD OF HEALTH
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December 10, 2002

To: Washington State Board of Health Members
King County Board of Health Members

From: Don Sloma, Executive Director, State Board
Maggie Moran, Administrator, King County Board

RE: POLICY DEVELOPMENT IN ADDRESSING HEALTH BEHAVIORS

Background and Summary

The recently released Institute of Medicine report, “The Future of the Public’s Health in the 21st Century” states, “...*there is strong evidence that behavior and environment are responsible for over 70 per cent of avoidable mortality...*” Yet the report finds that about 95 percent of the nation’s \$1.3 trillion annual investment in health care in 2000 was directed toward medical care and biomedical research. The report presents “...*the well supported hypothesis that the health of populations and individuals is shaped by a wide range of factors in the social, economic, natural, built and political environments.*” And calls upon local public health leaders to take a variety of steps “...*to fully include communities as potential actors in the public health system and to sustain change in the conditions for health...*” (Please see the Executive Summary of the IOM report attached.)

Long-published research cited in the IOM report indicates that as many as two-thirds of deaths are attributable to a short list of personal behaviors including tobacco and other substance abuse, diet and exercise patterns, motor vehicle safety habits and unsafe patterns of sexual behavior. A growing body of scientific evidence is developing that documents the efficacy of a variety of social and behavioral interventions to modify these behaviors. The interventions range from education to criminalization of certain behavior. For example, we currently supply scientific information about the health effects and risks of a wide variety of diet, physical activity and other behavior. Washington and many other states have publicly funded social marketing campaigns related to tobacco and other drug use. Some local health jurisdictions in Washington are promoting hiking trails and other land use decisions in an effort to create physical environments more conducive to healthful choices. Regulatory policies to promote healthy behavior include no smoking ordinances. Legal sanctions prohibiting dangerous behavior include child car seat laws, seat belt laws and drunk driving laws.

But many of the very same choices that affect our health also relate to our economic, social and spiritual lives. In other words, they involve considerations other than just health. They are personal choices. And in our society, influencing personal choice has always been controversial, particularly if such influence involves the use of governmental resources or powers. As a result, personal freedom, the autonomy of markets, and other deeply held values in our free society typically figure heavily in our decisions about influencing health behavior.

Weighing the public health value vs. the cost to personal autonomy and other social values is the role of public health policy groups like legislatures and boards of health when presented with any strategy to use government power or resources to influence health behavior.

As public health practitioners seek to address the significant contribution of personal behavior to health status, particularly in emerging areas such as obesity, they would like to understand more about the values, attitudes and reactions of public health policy makers on these issues.

To that end, the attached matrix illustrates some of the considerations and existing policies associated with preventing child injuries in motor vehicle crashes, tobacco use and obesity. The matrix will be presented for discussion by Dr. James LoGerfo, M.D., University of Washington Professor of Medicine and Health Services and Director of the University of Washington Health Promotion Research Center. It is not definitive, but rather illustrative and intended as a rough tool to stimulate such a discussion. Following Dr. LoGerfo's presentation, it is hoped board members will discuss their support, concerns or questions about the strategies currently employed to influence these health behaviors.

Recommended Board Action

No specific action is recommended at this time. Staff awaits direction from the Boards about what, if any follow up activities should be undertaken.